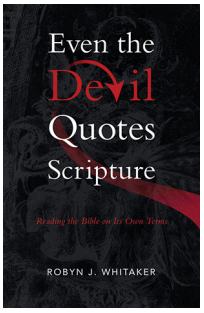
Book Review



Whitaker, Robyn.
Even the Devil Quotes Scripture
Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
2023. 189 pp

Reviewed by, Jason Hensley, Adjunct Professor of Religion and History, California Lutheran University.

The title of Robyn Whitaker's book, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture*, reflects the importance of biblical interpretation and the issue that Scripture can easily be wrested. Whitaker, who is Associate Professor of New Testament at the University of Divinity, Melbourne, addresses biblical hermeneutics, her journey of faith, and how her experiences have affected her method of exegesis. She begins by detailing her early life as a fundamentalist Christian, her journey into seminary, and her surprise as she studied the history of the biblical canon(s).

In chapter one, Whitaker addresses the different biblical canons used by different Christian groups, and what these groups mean when they say the Bible is "inspired". Ultimately, Whitaker admits that she has now left her fundamentalist view and instead holds to a much looser view of inspiration. For Whitaker, inspiration is more of a feeling, rather than a type of dictation (p. 23). She also questions inerrancy by asserting that "the Bible itself is infused with cultural limitations and human bias as well as human imagination and creativity" (p. 28).

In chapter two, Whitaker argues that the Bible interprets itself. While this concept may seem relatively straightforward, Whitaker means something much more nuanced. She is not suggesting that one passage in the Bible helps to elucidate the original authorial intent of the initial passage, but rather later authors reinterpreted the Scriptures and created their own meanings and relevance (p. 54). For Whitaker, this is an example for the church. In fact, it is not merely an example, it is an imperative.

In chapter three Whitaker explains why this approach to interpretation is so important to her. She argues that biblical records hold contradictory information and these supposed contradictions are the result of different authors holding different interpretations. For example, Whitaker argues because Gen 1 and 2 are pitted against each other, it suggests that they were written by separate authors. In presenting her argument, she uses a blend of form criticism, comparing the creation accounts with other cultures' origin stories (p. 68), and source criticism, in which she associates the Gen 1 story with the "Priestly tradition of biblical writers" (p. 71).

In chapter four, Whitaker continues to argue that these apparent contradictions are not contradictions, they are simply multiple interpretations. Since later authors reinterpreted the Bible, and the Bible discusses events that pertain to history, later authors reinterpreted Israel and Judah's history. Thus, Chronicles is not a parallel account of history to Kings, it is an additional, different account, that focuses on different things. Historicity is not the concern. Theology is. The gospels are interpreted in this same way. Whitaker writes, "[The authors of the gospels] were not interested in writing a

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historically precise account of events for the sake of history alone. They were not impartial (not that any history is impartial)" (p. 98).

In Chapter five Whitaker argues that Jesus also reinterpreted the Bible, just as Old Testament authors had. In examining Jesus's quotation of Isa 61 while in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18–19), she suggests that Jesus interpreted the passage by "plac[ing] himself in the prophecy of Isaiah" and that the blended quotation (of Isa 61 and 58) could possibly be Luke misremembering the passage and accidentally combining two chapters. Thus, her approach focuses less on the authority of the text of Scripture and rather on the way that the text was used; the text was given immediate relevance and that immediately relevant form of interpretation provides a guide to the church today.

Finally, chapters six and seven are the climax of Whitaker's argument regarding interpretive method. To this point, Whitaker has attempted to show that the Bible should be interpreted with an emphasis, not on the text itself, but on how the text can be made relevant to the current situation. Furthermore, Whitaker reveals that the purpose of biblical interpretation is not understanding what historically took place and thereby attempting to understand God's working throughout history; interpretation is about love. Whitaker calls this approach the "hermeneutic of love." Whitaker defines love as "based in action: patience, kindness, lack of irritability, lack of arrogance, and forbearance" (p. 137). If one's interpretation does not result in an application related to love, then the interpreter has missed the point, and the text has not been made relevant.

In many ways, Whitaker's book is fascinating as she impressively blends traditional hermeneutics with her "hermeneutic of love." The problem with her approach, however, is that it appears to approach the Bible in a way that the Bible itself does not advocate. While Whitaker uses the Bible to show how Jesus interpreted the Bible (which she does successfully), her initial assumptions about the Bible create a difficult dynamic in the book. Although Whitaker sees God as inspiring the Bible, she sees it as the flawed product of humans who will contradict one another and even make statements that are simply untrue. These assumptions lead to a difficult interpretive stance: "Many contemporary Christians…have been taught that inerrancy is the correct belief about the Bible…Such a stance puts faith at odds with scientific and historical scholarship, pitting belief in a creator God against evolution, and rejecting contemporary medical insights on matters of gender or sexuality" (p. 26). Although this book seeks to consider how those in the Bible interpreted the biblical books that possessed, it also undermines itself by fighting the Bible's own authority. While the "hermeneutic of love" is helpful in establishing the first and second greatest commandments as the test by which the rest of the Bible is interpreted and applied, the book also creates doubts about the relevance of the Bible itself. Why is a hermeneutic of love significant if the Bible is riddled with errors and contradictions? Why use the Bible if one cannot really trust what it says?

Whitaker repeatedly recalls her seminary experiences and her struggle with seeing some of the possible biblical contradictions that she had not known as a fundamentalist. This book is her wrestling with that assault, and ultimately blending higher criticism with a belief in God's existence and inspiration of the Bible. What results is a book that asserts the importance of love, but ultimately breaks down the trust that one has in the Bible, and, while attempting to

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remain respectful toward the Bible, begins to push it into irrelevance.

With that said, if one can hold on to a high view of the Bible and overlook the faulty approach to certain biblical passages, this book has much to offer. Christianity needs to be reminded of the hermeneutic of love. Jesus taught that love was the summation of the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:36–40). Paul wrote that love was the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14). Furthermore, Jesus and Paul both derived their teaching from the Torah itself (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:4–9). Love is thus central to Christianity and Scripture revolves around it. Whitaker's book reminds Christians of this and urges us to take that love and put it at the forefront of our understanding, every time we read the Bible. Certainly, that is a valuable reminder.

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